



MyPyramid in Action: Dietary Supplements During Pregnancy and Breastfeeding

What Is a Dietary Supplement?

A dietary supplement can be any of the following:

- a vitamin
- a mineral
- an herb or other botanical
- an amino acid
- a substance such as an enzyme



*Don't rely on supplements to make up for an unhealthy diet.
They cannot replace a healthy diet.*

Ask About Taking a Supplement.

Most doctors suggest that pregnant women take a vitamin and mineral pill every day. This is **in addition to** eating a healthy diet. Doctors often suggest a supplement for those trying to get pregnant, as well. Supplements designed for pregnant women are called “prenatals.”

Why Take a Prenatal Supplement?

During pregnancy, you need more of some vitamins and minerals. This makes it difficult to get all that you need from food. Your need for **folic acid** and **iron** is especially high.



Folic Acid: Folic acid is a B vitamin. It helps prevent serious birth defects. These birth defects can happen before a woman knows she is pregnant. Folic acid is important for any woman who could become pregnant. Most prenatal supplements contain 600 micrograms per day of folic acid. This is the amount recommended for pregnant women.

Iron: Pregnant women need extra iron. Iron helps keep your blood healthy and carries oxygen to your cells. Plus, your baby needs to store iron for the first few months of life. Too little iron can cause *anemia*. If you have anemia, you might look pale or notice that your nails are pale. You may feel very tired. Doctors check for anemia with blood tests. Most prenatal supplements contain 27 milligrams per day of iron. This is the amount recommended for pregnant women.

Take a prenatal supplement instead of individual vitamins or minerals to get balanced amounts of the vitamins and minerals you need. A high dose of some nutrients in a supplement, in particular vitamin A, can be harmful to your baby. Too much vitamin A from supplements can cause birth defects.

More About Dietary Supplements During Pregnancy and Breastfeeding

Not All “Natural” Products Are Safe.

Avoid herbal products when you are pregnant or breastfeeding. Not all “natural” products are safe. They are not tested or regulated like drugs and medicines. If you are already taking a supplement or herbal product, tell your doctor. Also, tell your doctor about any other medicines you are taking. There could be interactions of your supplement with these medicines.

For breastfeeding women: Your nutrient needs also increase when you are breastfeeding. To meet these needs, some **breastfeeding** women may also need a vitamin and mineral supplement. Talk with your doctor about taking a supplement while you are breastfeeding.



What About Fortified Foods?

Some fortified foods may help you meet your nutrient needs while you are pregnant or breastfeeding. For example:

- **Folic acid**—Enriched bread, flour, pasta, rice, and other grain products are fortified with folic acid. Most ready-to-eat cereals are also fortified with folic acid. Check the label and choose products with folic acid.
- **Iron**—Some ready-to-eat and cooked cereals are fortified with iron. When you are pregnant, choose these cereals to help meet your increased need for iron. All WIC* cereals are iron fortified.
- **Vitamin D**—All fluid milk, including fat-free and low-fat milk, is fortified with vitamin D. Foods made from milk, such as yogurt, may also be fortified with vitamin D. Some calcium-fortified fruit juices also have vitamin D added. Check the label and choose products with vitamin D.
- **Iodine**—Some salt is fortified with iodine, an essential mineral. Choose salt that is labeled “Iodized salt.” But remember—keep the amount of salt and sodium you eat low.

*WIC stands for USDA's Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children.



Get a MyPyramid Plan for Moms designed just for you on the MyPyramid website. Go to www.mypyramid.gov. Choose “For Pregnancy and Breastfeeding” on the left side menu.